



## Fassbinder: The Poetry of the Inarticulate

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PAUL THOMAS

# FASSBINDER:

## The Poetry of the Inarticulate

*"One does not become a Marxist through science, but through indignation."* —MERLEAU-PONTY

Rainer Werner Fassbinder is a man who knows how to hate. More to the point—but very much connected with it—Fassbinder's films may have extended the language and method of film more than those of any young film-maker of his generation. His work has remarkably little overlap with that of his contemporary fellow-countrymen (notably Werner Herzog and Alexander Kluge). The sensibility which permeates his prodigious output has few precursors in the history of the cinema. There are, of course, influences which are easily enough identified (Straub, Godard, Sirk, Visconti); but over and above this uneasy amalgam, Fassbinder's sensibility is all his own. He presents us with a wholly original mix of ideology and humanism. What animates his work is a sympathy for his characters offset against, and sometimes overpowered by, a bitterness about West German capitalist society and its champions; what emerges is the possibility of a genuine, nondogmatic Marxist cinema—one which does not displace concern for the victims of society by writing them off as vehicles of "History" or ciphers "representing" historical forces, but one which directly *expresses* such concern. Film and its sister arts, theater and television, as Fassbinder has repeatedly said (and demonstrated) are uniquely fitted to express concern for humanity.

Such statements may seem disingenuous, referring as they do to a director who has been criticized—but not written off—as a latter-day proponent of Viscontian melodrama, as an artist-intellectual with proletarian fever, as an agit-prop romanticist, as an unconscionable mixture of *enfant terrible*

and good old German misogynist *Spiessburger*, or even as an imagist of hermaphroditic freakishness. It's true that there is an element of what might be termed political "hyper-realism" in some of Fassbinder's films; true, too, that he opens himself up to the charge of being not only melodramatic but also a kind of specialist in camp, in the sense of working with artifice and theatricality, the banal and the "vulgar" as well as the outlandish, with no apparent discomfort. But all of these accusations fail to get to the heart of the matter. Fassbinder apparently is beginning to enjoy a certain *succès de scandale* among non-German movie audiences on account of the notoreity that has attached itself to his recent films that are set in, and deal with, certain identifiable, "fashionable," milieux, particularly female homosexuality in *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant*, and male homosexuality in *Fox*. These films are, in fact, among his very best; yet, what is distinctive about them is not their choice of subject matter, or "subculture," but the treatment Fassbinder succeeds in giving them, a treatment which transcends the category of subculture altogether.

The treatment in question can, and should, be traced back through Fassbinder's earlier, less well-known films—a long list of them; Fassbinder, who was born in 1946, has been making films, with frequent interruptions and forays into theater and TV, only since 1969. Inevitably, the list is uneven, stretching from his earliest efforts made under the aegis of the Munich Anti-Theater (a Marxist collective of actors and technicians), and under the not always salutary influence of Godard and Straub, to a studio production like the very successful *Effi Briest* (1974), a period piece that took a year to complete. What runs through them all, however, is an anger which is remote from the inanities of dogmatic "socialist realism" and the pitfalls of mock heroics alike. One of the things

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With thanks to the Pacific Film Archive for its recent Fassbinder retrospective.

*The  
street-  
corner  
society of  
KATZEL-  
MACHER*



that is anti-theatrical about the Anti-Theater is its opposition to mock heroics, an opposition Fassbinder is prepared to push a long way. Bertolt Brecht (whose "alienation effect" Fassbinder admits as a modulated influence on his own work) expressed admiration in his essay on Kafka for those persons who "cry out, even from under the wheels." Fassbinder does not shrink from centering his attention (admiration in the Brechtian sense being an idea whose time is long past) on those who *don't* cry out from under the wheels, who don't know how, who don't even see that the wheels are there. We are a long way from cardboard "socialist heroes" among the street corner society of *Katzelmacher* (1969), where people simply hang around aimlessly, not united by any real bonds but rather fused into a negative uniformity by the supposed threat of the immigrant worker. This setting is a long way even from the romanticization of the underworld we find in a René Clair or Jean Gabin film of the thirties, or a Hollywood *film noir* of the forties. Fassbinder's street corner in Munich has *no* atmospherics, but simply characteristics or rituals—the downcast eyes, the muttered inarticulate threats, the sunglasses stuck into the shirt front, the shuffling, hands-in-pockets walk, the pinball machine. This world of what sociologists call (at a distance) urban anomie, with its petty criminality and implicit violence, is not a *nice* world—it's so Sartrean that the characters in *Katzelmacher* don't even

address each other by name, referring to one another only in the third person—but it exists: beyond, or just beyond the purview of most filmmakers, it is the world to which Fassbinder returns and refers throughout his films.

There is something prodigious, indefatigable, about Fassbinder's output. Not only has he directed some 20 features since 1969; he has written and directed a long TV series (*Acht Stunden sind Kein Tag*), written and produced some 25 plays, videotaped some and filmed others, and made numerous acting appearances in his own and others' films. This dizzying pace is not restricted to Fassbinder alone, for he has always worked with an identifiable group of actors and/or technicians (the Herr R. of *Why does Herr R. Run Amok?* is Kurt Raab, who designed the sets for this and other Anti-Theater films; Irm Herrmann, who never got very big parts, graduated to being Fassbinder's production assistant) whose membership has remained remarkably constant and loyal to the collective enterprise. Apart from being a "stock company" (think of the ubiquity of Hanna Schygulla) in his own movies, Fassbinder and his colleagues, who sometimes seem like a medieval actors' troupe with Marxist workers' control thrown in, can be seen in Straub's *The Bridegroom, the Comedienne and the Pimp*.

The group's first play, *Katzelmacher*, was filmed in 1969 on the proceeds of the advance sale of its TV rights; *Love Is Colder than Death* and *Gods of*

*the Plague* (both 1969) were financed in the same manner. Fassbinder later admitted that these three earliest films were "very theatrical," but they were sufficiently successful to enable the group to qualify for a West German state subsidy. Fassbinder used the money to finance "more purely filmic" efforts, which he described in an interview as "investigations into German actualities: immigrant workers, the oppression of a middle-class office worker, our own political situation as film-makers. *Beware the Holy Whore* (1970) is specifically about the situation of trying to live and work as a group." As such, it may yield as little easy optimism as its obverse, *Katzelmacher*, for *Beware the Holy Whore* is manifestly about the experience of *failing* "to live and work as a group" and about the group's breaking up as a result, a process we in the audience watch happening.

Fassbinder believes, as a Marxist, that the work (here, the film) should represent the process of its own production. *Beware the Holy Whore* is a case in point; contrived though it may be, it does express Fassbinder's desperation and it does signal a change in the tone and method of his films. The Anti-Theater was formed, as a group enterprise, and as a "free" group, without fixed division of labor or hierarchy; but the group came to operate in practice, to Fassbinder's evident despair, along the very "patriarchal" lines it was designed to subvert. Something similar happened in 1973 when the group moved to Frankfurt (where *Fox* is set) and reconstituted itself along the lines of a specialist but nonexploitative democratic division of labor, without hierarchy. But again the old forms reasserted themselves. As Fassbinder put it, in an interview with Colette Godard, "It's not that the model is false, it's that as yet we are incapable of assuming it. Nothing is to be gained by imposing in advance a theory, an ideological framework. Ideology must be born from practice. Nothing is to be gained from *being* a Marxist; it's worth everything to *become* one."

The shift in Fassbinder's thinking about working in groups is no mere opportunistic accommodation to intractable circumstances; it parallels a more fundamental shift in his thinking about the relationship of films to their audience. (In the epilogue to *Holy Whore*, Fassbinder quotes Thomas Mann: "I tell you, I am sick to death of portraying

humanity without partaking of humanity.") The most dramatic expression of this was Fassbinder's self-conscious disowning of one of his most powerful films, *Why Does Herr R. Run Amok?* (1969), which had set out to explain, and to a remarkable extent succeeds in explaining, the "motiveless" crime of an office-worker's apparently impulsive and inexplicable murder of three people, including his wife and child, before hanging himself the next morning. The kind of crime "covered" by the newspaper headlines that punctuate Sheila Ballantyne's novel *Norma Jean, the Termite Queen* is more common, after all, than we like to think. In retrospect, Fassbinder explained the abandonment of the aesthetic animating what had been one of his best and most unsettling films. "I thought," he said, "that if you brought people up against their own reality they'd react against it. I don't think that any more. I now think that the primary need is to satisfy the audience, and then to deal with political content . . . [using] the emotions generated to a particular end. It's a preliminary stage in a kind of political presentation. The main thing to be learned from American films was the need to meet their entertainment factor. . . . I find the process beginning in Douglas Sirk's films or in a film like Hitchcock's *Suspicion* . . ."

Fassbinder's admiration for Sirk is a matter of record. He once boasted of having seen *twenty* Sirk films in between making *The Pioneers of Ingolstadt* (1970) and *The Merchant of the Four Seasons*; the figure is unlikely (though just possible if Sirk's pre-Hollywood Danish output is included). Sirk has had an obvious visual influence on Fassbinder, but there is much more to the story than Sirk's (or Fassbinder's) evident pictorial ability. As Fassbinder himself once put it, "Sirk's lighting is always as unnatural as possible. Shadows where there shouldn't be any make feelings plausible which one would rather have left unacknowledged. In the same way, the camera angles in *Written on the Wind* are almost always tilted, mostly from below, so that the strange things in the story happen on the screen, not just in the spectator's head. Douglas Sirk's films liberate your head." Fassbinder is not just talking about visuals, for Sirk's strengths are in his opinion not purely visual in the first place. In Fassbinder's words, "Sirk has

said: you can't make films *about* things, you can only make films *with* things, with people, with light, with flowers, with mirrors, with blood, in fact with all the fantastic things that make life worth living. Sirk has also said: a director's philosophy is his lighting and camera angles. And Sirk has made the tenderest films I know; they are films of someone who loves people and doesn't despise them as we do."

Perhaps it's misleading to list Sirk among Fassbinder's influences under the headings of pictorialism and melodrama, for Fassbinder had already made ten films before he saw any of Sirk's—whereupon Fassbinder discovered an affinity between Sirk and himself, much as Baudelaire is supposed to have discovered an affinity with Edgar Allan Poe. The affinity in question can take surprising forms. The plot of Fassbinder's *Fear Eats the Soul* (1973) resembles that of Sirk's *All That Heaven Allows*, but this is not where Fassbinder got it from. In *The American Soldier* (1970) Fassbinder puts the plot of *Fear Eats the Soul* into the mouth of the chambermaid in the hotel where Ricky, the gangster, is holed up (with the difference that in this version, Ali is charged with Emmy's murder after six months of marriage). Fassbinder, who in 1970 had not yet seen Sirk's films, said later that he was, without knowing it, "so much in tune with Sirk" that the overlap came as no surprise to him.

The elements of this overlap or affinity tell us much about what is distinctive about Fassbinder's approach to film-making. There is the social awareness ("in Sirk, people are always placed in rooms already heavily marked by their social situation") and this is just as true, if not more so, with Fassbinder—whose words they are—himself. "Women think in Sirk's films. Something that has never struck me with other directors. None of them. Women are usually reacting, doing what women are supposed to do, but in Sirk they think. It's great to see women think. It gives one hope. Honestly." And there is the conviction that Fassbinder sees in Sirk, and expresses in his own films, that "people who are brought up to be useful, with their heads full of manipulated dreams, are always screwed up."

Neither Sirk, nor Fassbinder, is reluctant to show us that this is so even with the most melo-



FEAR EATS THE SOUL

dramatic of means. Fassbinder believes, with Sirk, that "madness is a sign of hope." His films are populated with minds at the end of their tether, even more than Sirk's are; and many critics have found Fassbinder hard to take because of the melodramatic means he has used (and still uses, if we are to believe reports from Cannes about his new film, *Satansbraten*) to point up his theme of desperation. Melodramatic elements abound in Fassbinder's films. Why should Ali be stricken with the "immigrant's disease" at the end of *Fear Eats the Soul* just as Emmy so movingly forgives and accepts him? Why does *Wildwechsel* (1972) need the *coup de grâce* of Hanni's being told by the gynecologist (Hanna Schygulla) that her baby was born dead and deformed? It's arguable that the remarkable thing is the extent to which Fassbinder gets away with hitting home in this fashion; but it would be hard to argue that Fassbinder is not laying it on too thickly when he has Hanni, the sexually precocious child, react to the news by playing hopscotch in the courtroom corridor. Fassbinder would presumably not deny that such moments in his films (and there is no shortage of them) are extreme: he simply would not admit this as *criticism*. He is certainly using melodrama consciously and intentionally. When, in *The Merchant of the 4 Seasons*, Hans, back from the Foreign Legion (!) is greeted by a mother Hitchcock himself would regard as excessive, or when, later in the film, the applicant for the job of Hans's assistant should turn out to be none other than Harry, whom we have already seen pick up Hans's wife, we begin to wonder. The plot seems, not to put too fine a point on it, almost operatically

contrived, and orchestrated around cinematic moments like the quick cut-away shot of Hans's wife, her face caught in the kitchen mirror, when Harry walks into the room.

Fassbinder has defended his melodramatic propensities in no uncertain terms. "I don't find melodrama 'unrealistic'; everyone has the desire to dramatize the things that go on around him . . . everyone has a mass of small anxieties that he tries to get around in order to avoid questioning himself; melodrama comes up hard against them. . . . The only reality that matters is in the viewer's head." What we are faced with, then, is the curious presence of melodrama without theatrics, without mock-heroics, melodrama wrested from its usual purpose, melodrama wedded to an insistent pessimism which, Fassbinder insists, *can* provoke action. "Hope," he said to Colette Godard, "does not exist in my films. It can only be born in the head of the audience." And, what is more, it can flourish only if it is divested, forcibly if need be (this being the point of the melodrama), from any false expectations about how easy "liberation" is supposed to be. This statement is, in fact, as true of an early effort such as *The Niklashauser Drive* (1970), where Fassbinder casts himself as the questioner who needs to be convinced of all the arguments advanced, as it is of the post-*Herr R.* films, where Fassbinder's desire is to present to his audience not so much a reflection of their predicament as the dangers arising from it. Inevitably, there is in these latter films the likelihood of increased contrivance, but Fassbinder is not the man to be disturbed by this. "All creativity is artificial. Authors and actors who attempt to

reproduce reality lose their personality. . . . Objective reality doesn't exist. Realism is founded on the dialectical relationship between that which is given and that which is received. The only reality is the relation of the work to its publics, according to the framework with which it is presented; theater, cinema, television. The only realist attitude is to study it, to know it, to use it, and not to let oneself be limited by it."

It takes courage, in an age that devalues melodrama, to harness elements of the melodrama in the service of dramatization without romanticization, in the service of an original and unprecedented aesthetic. What Fassbinder is doing, after all, is dismissing the traditional notion of dramatic probability. He certainly admires melodramatic directors. Besides Sirk, we have Visconti; and, no matter how odd it looks in the pantheon alongside *Vivre sa Vie*, *The Damned* is perhaps the greatest film, the film that I think means as much to the history of the film as Shakespeare does to the history of the theater . . . because with artistic means he has been able to deal with history in the same way that Shakespeare does. It's not an historical treatment of Nazism, just as Shakespeare's dramas are not historical dramas." Whereas Visconti worked as a "realist," if only in the Lukácsian sense of "realism" as opposed to "naturalism," by his use of human types to embody historical processes and represent social classes, Fassbinder eschews realism even in this restricted sense. "I don't want to create realism the way it's usually done in films," he has said. "It's a collision between film and the subconscious that creates a new realism. If my films are right, then a new realism comes about in the head, which changes the social reality. . . ." So realism in Fassbinder is not so much a matter of *portrayal* (as it so often is in most Marxist aesthetics, those of Lukács included) as it is a matter of perception of the film's method and consequent social understanding and action based upon it.

Clearly, Fassbinder's program is not an easily inviting one. It asks us to rethink the relation between film and audience, to reconsider the ways in which film *can*, in fact, raise consciousness. Fassbinder has no time for Eisenstein; making the masses into an epic hero does not break with the

THE MERCHANT OF THE 4 SEASONS



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epic-heroic mode, and by the same token devalues the individual qualities that go to make up mass action. But these individual qualities are very much Fassbinder's stock in trade. He is, in general, uninterested in the "great," the notable, the distinguished; figures like the hideously parodied Bishop in *The Niklashauser Drive* appear very rarely. Of Fassbinder's recent films, only *Effi Briest*, *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant*, and *Fox* deal with people in modern capitalist society who might be termed successful, and such success as they enjoy is paid for very dearly. His main concern is with those who don't "make it," those who are condemned by the vagaries of the German "economic miracle" to a foreclosed existence. As Fassbinder has his own character say in *The Holy Whore*, "the only thing I can accept is despair." His recurrent centerpiece, the dumpy, overweight, unattractive and none-too-articulate hero, could be traced back along an alcoholic line to von Stroheim's *Greed*, although the line, if we must trace one, is more nearly to *Woyzeck*; Fassbinder is, after all, making films for German audiences in the first instance. The only close cinematic precursor of this central figure (Hans in *The Merchant of the 4 Seasons*, Herr R., or indeed Fassbinder himself in *Fox*) is probably Richard Harris in Lindsay Anderson's *This Sporting Life*—the film that, by portraying working-class people as *people* (not ciphers) with feelings and psyches and destructive potential, broke new ground. But *This Sporting Life* was too isolated, too strong, to be an *example* of anything outside itself; the field remained open for Fassbinder to demonstrate that "the proletariat has its own *Angst*, its own difficulties with life," an *Angst* we would do well to acknowledge and confront.

Fassbinder in this enterprise is not filling in the gaps left by others; he is picking up the pieces left by society. If there is a single spoken line in his films that sums up his animus against this society, it is in *Fox* when an upper-class character says, in passing, of a lower-class character, "People like that are too crude to be in despair." On the contrary, says Fassbinder, one cannot be "too crude" to have feelings, for there is nothing refined or exalted about feelings, but only about the way some people look at other people. He dramatizes



THE BITTER TEARS OF PETRA VON KANT

the point in *Fox* by himself playing the part of the lower-class homosexual, reduced to despair and suicide by the machinations of the film's upper-class homosexuals, and by portraying the role with an intense presence and luminosity which makes his portrayal by far his best acting performance to date. In an interview with Tony Rayns right after *Fox* was finished, Fassbinder characterized it in terms that, coming from anybody else, would have seemed tongue-in-cheek. "It's a film about capitalism," said Fassbinder. "The story of a lottery winner and how he loses his money." No mention of how practically every character in the film is a homosexual. As Fassbinder later put it, "Nobody has ever said (before) that the life of the homosexual is subject to the same mechanics and dynamics as the life of so-called normal people"—a point that

*Fox* (much more than *Petra von Kant*) demonstrates with a brutal and sustained immediacy, not least through Fassbinder's own acting role. As David Robinson has said, "Just because the theme of homosexuality provides the milieu and not the main point of the film, it is more persuasive than other films . . . that openly plead the Gay Lib cause." Robinson, who is quite right, if anything understates the impact of *Fox*. Homosexual exploitation is still exploitation; an erotic exploitative relation between two people is no less exploitative for being erotic. And in this case it is class, not sexual preference and "politics," that calls the shots. Fassbinder's way of presenting this reality is as original as it is harrowing. The melodrama is there, but it is not crucial; what is crucial is the portrayal of a homosexual relationship and swindle exactly as a heterosexual relationship and swindle would be portrayed (which cuts through jaded and naive responses in much the same way). Behind this there is a tough balance to maintain, a balance between presenting the story as a fable, an object-lesson transcending the ostensible sensationalism of the theme, and making it believable and absorbing. Fassbinder's extraordinary talents as an actor, which in earlier films had been suggested rather than celebrated, do much to sustain the balance; and his talent as director does almost all the rest.

There are shots and sequences in *Fox* that would remind anyone who needed reminding of Fassbinder's visual, even painterly skills. The film, which starts out with a long shot of a chaos of bright, primary colors in a fairground, seen from the Big Wheel, gradually orchestrates itself around the color blue, which is offset against other markedly arresting colors in a manner Godard himself couldn't fail to admire, until finally the dead body of Fox is happened upon, among the antiseptic blue tiles of an ultra-modern Frankfurt subway station. The progression in colors is the integrated visual counterpart of, and counterpoint to, the progression from a bustling humanity (the fairground) to the desolation of a lonely suicide (the most solitary of acts); but it's also the progression from the kind of crowd seen sometimes in Breughel, where everything is colorful and in movement, but where no one feels at ease, where the motion itself separates the characters so that each feels as alone

as everyone else—and it's a progression to the loneliest of deaths in the most sterile of surroundings; but even here the parasites will not leave Fox alone. Small boys rifle his pockets and steal his coat; and two homosexual lovers, who we know share in the responsibility for the decline of Fox, decide the body is none of their business, they can't afford to get involved, it's best to leave well enough alone. And the film ends with romantic music.

The films that best integrate the visual with the dramatic and political in this kind of way are (besides *Fox*) *Petra von Kant*, *The Merchant of the Four Seasons*, *Fear Eats the Soul*, and *Effi Briest*. Elsewhere, Fassbinder's finely tuned visual sense emerges only sporadically and intermittently, in what are often breathtaking set-pieces, *plan-séquences* and individual shots, all painstakingly planned and sparingly used. Above all, Fassbinder knows when *not* to use them. There is nothing beautiful about the streets of Munich's more drab and anonymous sections (or the lives of those who live there), nor is Fassbinder the man to invest them with even the kind of charm at a distance that Godard, for instance, managed to attribute to the less glamorous *quartiers* of Paris in *Bande à Part* or *Vivre sa Vie*. Fassbinder is on record as regarding *Vivre sa Vie* as one of the greatest films of all time, and references to its themes and even incidents (the record store in *Herr R.*, the prostitution motif) abound in his own films. The earliest films, in particular, bear the imprint of Godard; and, in keeping with their subject-matter, they are not painterly at all. What they are is, not to mince words, very "film school," very late-sixties. *Love Is Colder than Death* (1969) is saved from being sub-Godard (Ulli Lommel and Irm Hermann on the train is a crib from *La Chinoise*'s episode with François Jeanson and Anne Wiazemsky) only by being, almost in the same breath, sub-Straub (over-exposed fast footage, precisionist long takes on ostensibly unsexed themes, static or delayed-reaction camera-work, characters creating their own space within the frame, walking on, off, in or through it). Similarly, *Gods of the Plague* (1969) amounts to little more than a succession of vignettes paying dubious homage to the zaniness-and-criminality of *Bande à Part*, and as such, is saved from being sub-Godard only by its blatant cross-

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references to the American *film noir*, a genre better to be celebrated, visually as well as thematically, in *The American Soldier* (1970).

It's clear by the time of *Beware the Holy Whore* (1970), which self-consciously features Eddie Constantine (*Alphaville*'s Lemmy Caution), that even the genre of *film noir* filtered to Fassbinder through Godard. Fassbinder's early treatments of subcultures on the verge of criminality and prostitution bear the imprint of Godard, not always heavily-handedly. The textures particularly of *Love Is Colder than Death* are those of posters, advertisements, pornography, the surfaces of walls, the pinball machines and juke boxes—the debris from the collapse of the everyday. Fassbinder, with his eye for the discordant, places a juke box under an Old Master in *Holy Whore* (the holy whore of the title is, among other things, success and hierarchy) and a pinball machine in Franz's mother's living room in *The American Soldier*.

The tersely iconographic opening sequence of *Katzelmacher*, showing a shop-front with the word "Lebensmittel" [groceries] being covered over with the iron bars of a shutter, is a telling example of Fassbinder's intermittent genius for creating effects. But even if they are jarring effects, all these remain on the level of effects—devices, that is to say, which are not integrated into the overall mechanism of the film in which they have but a minor part. Fassbinder is clearly capable of some astonishingly beautiful visual effects, as the mauves and yellows of Hanna's apartment (not to mention the ambitious *plans-séquences* around it) in *Rio das Mortes* (1970) testify eloquently. Yet, were it not for the fact that he had already made *Herr R.*, one would have to conclude that even in the delightful *Rio das Mortes* Fassbinder, for all his visual flair, had not yet really found his feet as a film-maker. He gives us the Godardian triangle (this time of Hanna, Michel, and Gunther) again, produces from it a bittersweet levity recalling not so much anything by Godard as *Lions' Love* of Agnes Varda—and the fantasy-turning-to-reality of escape from the very street-corner society and violence so unlovingly portrayed in *Katzelmacher*. The theatrics of *Rio das Mortes*, accordingly, are the dialectical obverse of those of *Katzelmacher* itself.

In *Katzelmacher*, Fassbinder sustains the tension



Eddie Constantine and Hanna Schygulla in  
BEWARE THE HOLY WHORE

animating (if "animating" is the right word) his characters by returning to the same locales, the street corners and walkways, and by varying the subsets of characters who inhabit and pass through

KATZELMACHER



them; it's not until *Why Does Herr R. Run Amok?* that he resorts to more purely filmic and less theatrical means to establish his point about the hideousness of life in modern capitalist society. *Herr R.* is no less carefully constructed, or claustrophobic, than *Katzelmacher*, but has far fewer characters. From the extended Sartrean serial group we are switched to the nuclear family; from the plight of the immigrant worker (a role played with some impishness by Fassbinder himself) we are switched to that of the middle-class office worker, and from high-contrast black-and-white dappled sunlight we move to a curiously subdued and ominous color in winter-time. The transition in all cases is as carefully judged as it is effective; *Herr R.* is all too obviously a film in which every color, every shade, every tone, every filter is calculated with exquisite care to create, enhance, and sustain what becomes an unbearable paranoia, in which the sheer weight of the ordinary, the stream of meaningless verbiage, makes the eventual "senseless" murder something of a relief. *Herr R.* is a minor masterpiece because of the tension of the everyday it presents; it spins out this tension in a series of sequences in which screen time and elapsed time are one. At the same time, it's not at all sensational; the hysteria it expresses consists in the drabness and the stultifying boredom Fassbinder has the effrontery to present, flatly and directly.

As Karenia Niehoff (of the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, the Anti-Theater's local paper) put it, "Herr R., a simple person. His everyday life, without quotation marks . . . Linked in an uncomplicated way, very long, often silent sequences in the Fassbinder manner, time for the spectators to think, if they want to, or to have an uncomfortable feeling under their skin without knowing why . . . secretive, sloppy talk, unformulated—Anti-Theater's graduates are trained for this . . . And suddenly it happens: Herr R. doesn't run amok; he calmly listens to his wife's conversation with the neighbor, *lights the candles*, and hits first the woman, then his wife, finally his sleeping son with deadly force . . . Silently, unexpectedly, no screams . . . The next morning he hangs himself just as unexpectedly. The world wasn't evil—just not very good to him. He breaks it apart." But the world *is* evil, and drabness is no excuse against evil, as

*Herr R.* demonstrates all too well. The film does so by means of a visual style that is thoroughly integrated with the theme of mundane desperation. In an astonishing single-take *plan-séquence* of the office where Herr R. works, the camera drifts from desk to desk, Fassbinder's filters emphasizing the bluish, wintry light streaming through the windows. All is routine, order; it is the almost expressionist light that is unsettling, and its combination with the rambling camera that in picking out the office worker simultaneously displaces the spectator. The film moves between placement and displacement, and does so visually and dramatically all at once; discomfort is sustained and undermined at the same time. By the time we have seen Herr R.'s apartment interior (discordant reds, blues, and leopard-skin blacks and whites), by the time we have endured the parental visit, we are inside a case history, made up of sterility, boredom, vacuousness; and at this point Fassbinder lays on the almost surrealist horror of a walk through the snow (tinged pink by a filter) with the parents, a sequence which gives the impression of negative footage.

*Herr R.* stands out from Fassbinder's previous output by *not* being a succession of set-pieces, by not being punctuated by visual effects, but a film sustained and developed by carefully considered visual means ("Every color is thought out, each image is prepared," as Fassbinder once put it with uncharacteristic understatement). Yet Fassbinder's evident desire to accentuate reality by means of an extreme presentation of its contours eventually seemed to him to be politically counter-productive; it came to seem to him that *Herr R.*'s spinning-out of reality to a small-scale but extreme conclusion depended, ultimately, on the mechanistic notion that people in the audience, by seeing their own reality portrayed in this way, would automatically change that reality. Fassbinder's emphasis shifted to a more considered approach to the problem of how it is that people respond to the politics of the everyday; his politically motivated enterprise shifts from the film-maker/film axis to the film/audience axis.

But the shift did not take place immediately, and it was some time before Fassbinder disowned *Herr R.* After *Rio das Mortes*, in particular, a period of rather confused artistic and political experimentation set in (although periods with

Fassbinder, who has been known to shoot a film in ten or eleven days, tend to be short-lived). *Whity*, *The American Soldier*, *The Niklashauser Drive*, and *Beware the Holy Whore*, like *Rio das Mortes* (and like *Pioneers of Ingolstadt*, the film where Fassbinder found his feet again) all were made in 1970. The inventory of films made between *Rio das Mortes* and *Pioneers of Ingolstadt* is undistinguished, but with *Pioneers* Fassbinder returns to his themes of subculture and ritual, inaugurating what I take to be his greatest period (that of *The Merchant of the Four Seasons*, *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant*, *Wildwechsel*, *Fear Eats the Soul*, *Effi Briest* and *Fox*).

The other 1970 films in their different ways all deal with, and deal in, artifice and distance. *Whity*, despite an ending that recalls Stroheim's *Greed*, is more nearly a Viscontian melodrama, in which decadence is outmatched, not by the spaghetti-western overtones, but by the film's character as a fable of racial degradation and revenge. *Whity*, the black servant of a white family in a confected American-Western setting, is at once the still center of the action (much as Ricky, *der Killer*, is in *The American Soldier*) and the character on whom everybody's fantasies (social, hierarchical, sexual, racial) converge. In this sense *Whity* (Gunter Kauffman) is like Jorgo, the migrant worker in *Katzelmacher*, or indeed like the Terence Stamp character in Pasolini's *Teorema*—the universal scapegoat. But, like Herr R., he kills those who use him, which makes of them the authors of their own fate, and *Whity* the executioner. It also makes the film as contrived and ritualistic as *The Niklashauser Drive*, in a way that *Herr R.* was not. In *Whity*, a big studio-set production, Fassbinder juxtaposes people against paintings and objects in the frame (a technique that was to come to fruition in *Petra von Kant*); in *Niklashauser*, he makes the pictures come alive, juxtaposing people who pose like statues against *tableaux vivants* in a deliberate, disconcerting defiance of visual and historical laws alike. The effect is often of beautiful set-pieces and painterly group-compositions (cf. the imperceptibly slow camera movement into the group on the church porch at the beginning of the film); their essential defiance of common sense is the visual counterpart of the senselessness of the historical process itself. The most ostensibly revo-

lutionary of Fassbinder's films, *Niklashauser* uses the device of a fifteenth-century peasant agitator, who urged the abolition of all property relations ("The land to the people; death to the Pope and priests!") and was eventually burned as a heretic, as the pretext for urging revolution across the board, without regard for time or place; he populates the film with representatives of modern revolutionary movements (Gunter Kauffman as a Black Panther, Glauber Rocha's Antonio das Mortes) in a kind of orgy of nonsimultaneity and deliberate anachronism (Hans, the peasant agitator, is crucified and burned in an auto junk-yard, watched by a bishop in a Mercedes).

Somehow, *The Niklashauser Drive* is too much of a mosaic to be anything more than a revolutionary crazy-quilt. *Pioneers of Ingolstadt* (1970) is no less angry, restricts itself to a more manageable scale, and has greater visual unity. The soldiers and girls in the film seem to offer escape to one another, but what gets set up instead is a complex pattern of despair, desperation, fantasy, mutual need and use, self-deception, and betrayal—betrayal across sexual lines, but *not* across class lines (Unertl, the appalling grocer—who turns up again in *Fear Eats the Soul*—considers that "working-class women are not that important" and promises his son a BMW if he makes it with one of them). What sustains the film, strung out as it is between brutality and sexuality, two categories that overlap (as always with Fassbinder), is the bitter orchestration of the film around the rituals of the everyday. His long pan around the barroom, picking out couples, solitary drinkers, drunks, walls, pictures, for instance, works—where the sexual tableau sequence at the end of Mike Nichols's *Catch-22* doesn't work—precisely because of Fassbinder's ability to *place* his characters in their own context without patronizing them, to admit and portray despair where he sees it instead of using sexuality as the excuse for visual sensation, as Nichols does. As Fassbinder once put it, speaking about Sirk, rituals are important; "Some keep the world in place, some freak people out."

*The Merchant of the Four Seasons* (1971) demonstrates again Fassbinder's ability to put himself inside the rituals he would have us observe. The film would be a masterpiece for this reason alone. At one crucial point in the film he juxtaposes two



THE MERCHANT  
OF THE 4 SEASONS:  
*Hans dying  
at the family  
table  
battleground*

tables-as-battlegrounds in a manner that recalls the very different upper-class tables in Visconti films. He cuts between a medium-shot profile of Irmgard and the little girl at table, waiting for the return of Hans for dinner—a sparse and desolate shot of Irm Herrmann at her most pinched—and a slow tracking shot along a barroom table, up through a phalanx of embarrassed listeners, to Hans (Hans Hirschmüller) at the head of another table holding forth with glazed eyes about how he lost his job as a policeman for sexual misconduct. In the course of Hans's reminiscence, Fassbinder does something he very rarely attempts; he flashes back to the episode in question at the police station, and does so without losing the immediacy he has established; the reminiscence culminates with an extreme close-up of Hans's face in sexual ecstasy, the climax of the camera movement with which the sequence had started. The dumpy and unattractive Hans is suddenly beautiful; we are left with the question of how little—and how much—it takes to make one person happy.

The mood is, of course, not only broken by the appearance in the bar of Irmgard (Hans throws a chair at her) but shattered by the rest of the film (Hans is buffeted into literally drinking himself to death). Where the colors in *Pioneers* are predominantly blacks and browns, somber and subdued, the colors in *Merchant* are open and luminous.

Fassbinder compensates for the opacity of his lighting and the shadowlessness of his compositions by the use of filters. The results are often unforgettable—the shallow, still composition of Hans in a pale blue shirt, selling pale green pears, has a radiance to it that Manny Farber has (rightly) likened to the work of a medieval illuminator; or the forties grey suit, plum-red lips, and brandy glass of Hans's sister (Hanna Schygulla).

The visual style of *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant* is quite different, although Fassbinder once insisted that there is a thematic similarity with *The Merchant of the Four Seasons*. "It's the same subject," he said. "Everyone has experienced pain in love, and has wished (naturally enough) for a greater love than it was possible to have . . . most people suffer because they are incapable of really expressing their grief." *Petra* is stylized in an unusual way because of the nature of its characters. It emphasizes artefact because of the role of artifice in its characters' lives. The action is dominated, emblematically, by a huge Correggio, a male nude, on the wall of Petra's studio. The role of this enormous painting is not simply to provide pictorial opportunities for Fassbinder's camera (although some of the effects it gives rise to—the silver-fox fur and golden hair of Karin [Hanna Schygulla] against the pink and red flesh tones of the painting—are extraordinary enough). The painting

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stands for, and underlines, artifice. Petra herself is something of an artefact; she changes her appearance (and, apparently, her age, like Alida Valli in Visconti's *Senso*) with every sequence. The film itself is self-consciously "artificial," the acting proto-artificial; it is very much a chamber-film, of people who choose to present to the world versions of themselves, a film of personas and personages. The sequences correspond to act divisions in a play, yet the film itself is not Fassbinder's most theatrical film at all; it deals with a woman who habitually puts herself in theatrical situations. All the action takes place in one room, Petra's apartment and studio, where she works, aided by Marlene, her silent and (to use Manny Farber's word) sepulchral assistant—who is always dressed in black, always the mute onlooker, rather like the camera itself (the entrances of Sidonie and Karin are registered by cut-away shots of Marlene's reactions). Fassbinder even dedicates the film to Marlene "as she has now become," *i.e.* to Irm Herrmann, who takes the part, and who was to gravitate to being Fassbinder's production assistant for *Wildwechsel*, his next film.

Petra's apartment resembles a sound stage in a movie studio. Sets, props, curtains are used for decoration and depth; the camera, unusually mobile for Fassbinder, roams around in long, lateral movements, settling upon and picking out positions, shapes, angles, and textures. By its long takes it becomes a participant in the action, in a manner that recalls Hitchcock's *Rope*. The use of long takes, Fassbinder explained, is "strongly linked to the action. We reckoned that such and such a section was a sequence for the actress and had to be uninterrupted so that she could move through it. That was the first idea governing the film's structure, right from the original dramatic idea."

In a film where all the characters are women, Fassbinder this time presents a setting where the friendship between women excludes men (sexually), yet continually depends on them (socially, financially). Petra is the homosexual flourishing, ironically, in the men's world of women's dress design, and is doing so through her exploitation of Marlene (who is the only character we ever *see* working). Petra's friend Sidonie von Grassenab (the name is lifted from *Effi Briest*)—the woman who sets up

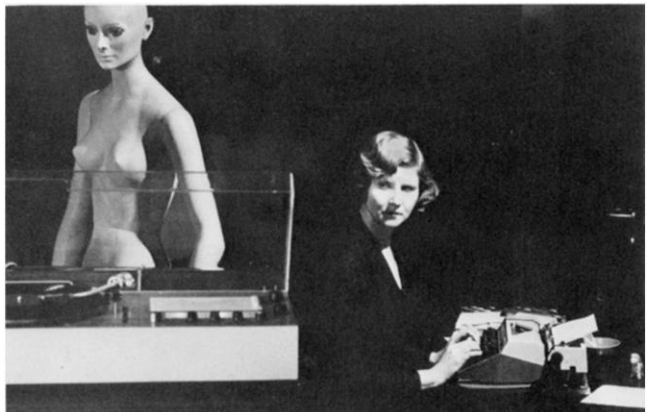


THE BITTER TEARS OF PETRA VON KANT

Petra with Karin—is making it in a man's world through her marriage; and Karin herself, who provokes Petra's anguish by deserting her (for a man) ends up working as a model for Pucci. To round it all out, Petra's 14-year-old daughter, Gaby, dwells upon the boy she has a crush on, who "looks like Mick Jagger."

Fassbinder's next films, *Wildwechsel* and *Fear Eats the Soul* (1973), proceed in markedly different directions. *Wildwechsel* (the word appears on German road signs where wild animals might cross), made originally for television, gives us Fassbinder at his most agit-prop and gut-wrenching. It establishes meaning through shock tactics. In its opening sequence, Fassbinder cuts from a romantic shot of the twin spires of a church, seen from across a river, to a fat woman, Hanni's mother, spitting into a wash-bowl; he cuts from Hanni and Franz's young love to the clatter and horror of the chicken factory, a death camp for

THE BITTER TEARS OF PETRA VON KANT



chickens, where Franz works. Landscape is the bucolic contrast to the drama, the ironic backdrop to the idiocy of rural life. *Fear Eats the Soul* is very different; warm where *Wildwechsel* is just bitter, it is a film that is modulated and sustained by a mood Fassbinder establishes, visually and dramatically in the same breath, by its arrangement around settings (particularly tables and staircases) rituals (eating and drinking) and colors (rich, shadowy reds, golds, and blacks). Yet, beneath all these dissimilarities, *Fear Eats the Soul* does resemble *Wildwechsel*. Neither film uses its main protagonists as ciphers. It would have been comparatively easy to have portrayed Franz and Hanni in *Wildwechsel*, or Emmy and Ali in *Fear Eats the Soul*, as the straightforward "victims of society"; but, instead, Fassbinder has the dynamics of the relationship between each couple contribute to its downfall. He said of *Fear Eats the Soul*, "It's the story of two people who are in practically the same situation, who have much the same motives for repressing themselves," and much the same could be said of Franz and Hanni in *Wildwechsel*. They murder Hanni's father, much to her atavistic jubilation, not *despite* his avowedly fascist opinions ("I'd rather gas a million Jews than have him fool around with our child") but because of those she's internalized (when her father suggests that "sex offenders" like Franz be castrated, she taunts him with it: "They'd cut it off, then you'd be just like me . . . then you'd be no good to me . . . I'd want nothing more to do with you . . ."). The protagonists contribute to their own downfall, and to the destruction of Hanni's

father, by virtue of the values (sexual, social) they share, without knowing it, with Hanni's parents.

*Fear Eats the Soul* is no less chilling, but much more poignant. The story is of the ostracism of Emmy Kurowski (Brigitte Mira, who appears again in *Mother Kuster's Trip to Heaven*), an elderly woman who works as a cleaning lady in Munich offices, and her Moroccan husband, Ali (El Hedi ben Salem). Its theme is that, as Emmy puts it at one point, "no one can live without other people—no one," and her accommodation even to the ugliness and viciousness of the racial prejudice revealed, excruciatingly, in practically every shot in the film. That Emmy and Ali are happy together counts not one whit; as the subtitle of the film tells us, "happiness is not always fun," and as one of the characters says of Emmy (who proceeds to act upon it), "What's happiness? There's such a thing as *decency*." The logic of characters and events works differently from that of *Wildwechsel*; the difference is between Fassbinder's compassion for his characters in *Fear Eats the Soul* and his sheer dislike of those in *Wildwechsel*. The clincher, the give-away, is, oddly, Fassbinder's casting of himself (as in *Whity*) as the most virulently fascist and racist character (one of Emmy's sons) in the film.

One reason why the logic operates so well, so inexorably, in *Fear Eats the Soul* is Fassbinder's use of a device he was to extend further in *Effi Briest* (1974), that of emphatic fade-outs at the end of each sequence to signify the passage of time, to distinguish event from event, and to distance the event from the spectator in such a way that the spectator is obliged to fill in the spaces for himself/herself. Fassbinder's rejection of the method of *Herr R.* really comes into its own only here. *Effi*, as Fassbinder put it, "works through two levels of alienation . . . (the white fade-outs) are one level . . . , like books which have white color and black print. According to Kracauer, when it gets black, the audience begins to fantasize, to dream, and I wanted the opposite effect through the white. I wanted to make them awake. It should not function like most films through the subconscious, but through the conscious. It's . . . the first time that I know of where the audience is supposed to have its own fantasy, like reading a novel—the first normal fiction film. . . . It's like a

Irm Herrmann and Fassbinder himself (as the racist son) in *FEAR EATS THE SOUL*



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novel that one reads where you can have your own dreams and fantasies at the same time. When you read a book, a novel, you imagine your own characters. That's just what I wanted to do in this film. I didn't want to have predetermined characters made for the audience; rather, the audience should continue the work . . ."

The opening quotation that sets the tone of *Effi Briest* tells us that society carries on because of the actions of people, people who, by taking no action *against* it, enable it to continue. The plot of Fontane's novel does scant justice to Fassbinder's treatment; his anger at a society that would permit such muted atrocities is contained only by the requirements of a controlled form. The stylization of the film, as in *Petra von Kant*, mirrors the stylization of the characters, their emotional responses, and the stylization of the society they live in and make up. The film ends on its *only* sustained long shot, one which transforms Effi's parents' failure to interrogate themselves into a condemnation of them *and* an interrogation of us. (Her mother, looking at Effi's childhood swing in the garden, wonders whether she and Effi's father weren't in some way responsible for Effi's death; he replies that such matters are too vast to contemplate).

Elsewhere, the film is spare, attenuated; there are short, truncated sequences, often ending in semi-stills of one of the characters; there are fades in and out of white; there are titles and voice-over narrations. Fassbinder, in an almost Bressonian manner, leaves out crucial scenes (Effi's marriage, the childbirth) because it is the *process*, the formality, the tight-lippedness of the characters that matter more than the incidents that express them. The only music is one phrase repeated at strategic moments (as in Godard's *Deux ou Trois Choses*); the characters are constantly framed, rather as Sirk would have framed them, by buildings, household objects, doorways, windows, mirrors. Everything, people and objects, *looms* ominously. The people oppress each other as their objects, settings and paraphernalia oppress them; but they watch each other all the time. The price of lack of liberty is the eternal vigilance of a prim, repressed society, its codes of loyalty, its frigidity, its poses.

As Marietta says to Effi (Hanna Schygulla) at a *soirée*, "we are watched from all sides," as chilling



Hanna Schygulla in EFFI BRIEST

a sentence as the "Tais-toi, Jacky, on te regarde" at the end of Renoir's *La Règle du Jeu*, coming as it does with a soft-focus, low-slung camera movement to a full-face close-up of Effi looking out of the frame. *Effi Briest*, despite the conscious artifice of Fassbinder's direction, is never staccato; the languor, the suffocation, the boredom are ominous from the first frame to the last.

Fassbinder here, and in all his best films, is in full control of his faculties as a director, taking full cognizance of where his ideas about film direction may lead. All his films are memorable, in a distinct and unsettling way; shots and sequences have a luminosity and vividness, actors and personages a presence, that make an ineradicable impression. One need only think of the long, low tracking shot down the aisle of the party meeting in *Mother Kuster's Trip to Heaven* (1975), the surrealist underground shopping center in *Fox*, the shot of Ali, framed by a doorway, sitting on the bar-girl's bed in *Fear Eats the Soul* (or the shot of Ali and Emmy at the yellow tables of the outdoor café in the rain), the Corregio in *Petra*



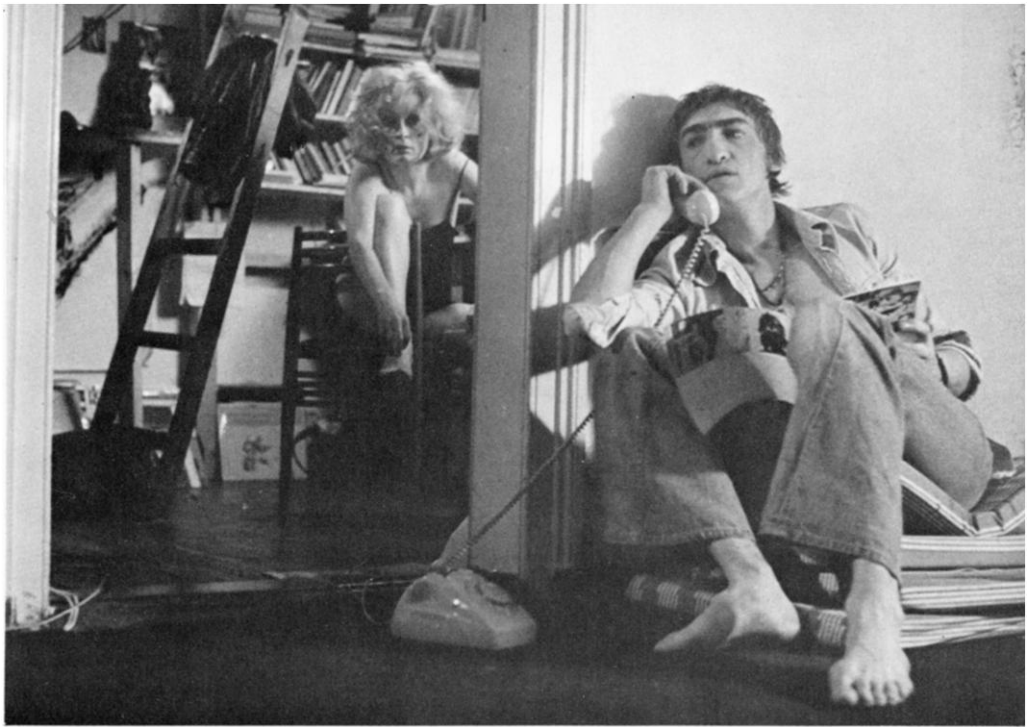
MOTHER  
KUSTER'S  
TRIP TO  
HEAVEN

von Kant, Hans selling fruit in *The Merchant of the Four Seasons*, to recognize in Fassbinder a director of real power. But what is this power? It's not a question of pure imagistics. Fassbinder would deny the importance of pure imagistics. We are closer to it in considering Fassbinder's integration of his visual skills within the enterprise of the film, within the stretched-out portrayal of a society that makes no sense, its outcasts, its marginalia, within Fassbinder's intense anger at what society can do to those whose actions sustain it.

Fassbinder said that the subject of *Fox* is "the fate of fatality, of submission to the abstract and absurd laws which direct (our social) existence." The same is true of his entire output, but would only go part of the way to explaining its impact. For Fassbinder is, above all else, a director of *impact*; in order not to be pushed under by the weight of an unbearable reality, he aims to strike back at this reality, and this defiance explains his anger and his furious productivity alike. Already, there's something "melodramatic" about the enterprise of trying to do so, in full knowledge of the dangers and pitfalls. But melodrama strains reality, strains it at its seams, and reality *needs* this kind of strain. What lends urgency to Fassbinder's

enterprise is his belief that film, instead of trying passively to reflect or portray social reality, should shift its focus to its own effects on its audience. This belief is no mere self-justifying rhetoric, but on the contrary cuts to the heart of a central problematic of politically committed cinema. The world Fassbinder sees and portrays in his films is dry and sterile, a kind of force-field through which his camera moves in order to confront it with its own consequences and absurdities. The world he presents is peopled by dissociated individuals with passions they are unable to confront or act out, individuals attracted and rejected by a pattern of forces they are unable to master, like iron filings on a magnetic field. To *reflect* this state of affairs is to reinforce the mechanics that keep it going; merely to portray it, however accurately and sensitively, is to indulge in the very passivity that sustains a society that must, after all, be *changed*. In a society divided into classes and races, having an elaborate sexual division of labor into the bargain, all real communication, all love, all compassion, is impossible; we can only engage in precautionary movements, gestures, rituals, habits. Fassbinder's films delineate these rituals. They compress, traverse, the world they make up,

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and trace out their consequences. It's no accident that one cannot feel comfortable watching any Fassbinder film; his repeated attempts to present society with its own logic involve a mixture of vivacity, innocence, and *insolence* in relation to which we are obliged to define our own responses.

Fassbinder's films are very much the kind of films we cannot imagine being made by anyone else; he has attempted, and is still constantly attempting, to reconcile the way he stamps them with an approach which is distinctively his own with the demands of revolutionary art as he sees them. That "the only reality that matters is in the head of the viewer" entails an original, complex aesthetic based on the proposition that the structure of a film by its very nature cannot *reflect* the structure of social reality.

Fassbinder, instead of *having* a message, is concerned to *pitch* a message, to generate responses among his audience (and his actors), responses they can live out and act upon. If film cannot reflect reality in any simplistic sense, it *can* portray the inhuman consequences of the social mechanism. This means we must recognize that film is not a reflective device but a transformative agency. Fassbinder has thus been stubbornly working to liberate

not only the heads of his audience but the politically committed cinema itself.

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- 1969 *Liebe ist kälter als das Tod* (Love is Colder than Death)  
*Katzelmacher*  
*Götter der Pest* (Gods of the Plague)  
*Warum läuft Herr R. Amok?* (Why does Herr R run Amok?)
- 1970 *Rio das Mortes*  
*Whity*  
*Niklashauser Fahrt* (The Niklashauser Drive)  
*Der Amerikanische Soldat* (The American Soldier)  
*Warnung von einer Heiligen Nulte* (Beware the Holy Whore)  
*Pioniere in Ingolstadt* (Pioneers of Ingolstadt)
- 1971 *Der Händler der Vier Jahreszeiten* (The Merchant of the 4 Seasons)
- 1972 *Die bitteren Tränen der Petra von Kant* (The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant)  
*Wildwechsel*
- 1973 *Angst essen Seele auf* (Fear Eats the Soul)  
*Martha*
- 1974 *Fontane Effi Briest* (Effi Briest)  
*Faust-Recht der Freiheit* (Fox)
- 1975 *Mutter Küsters Fahrt zum Himmel* (Mother Kuster's Trip to Heaven)  
*Angst für die Angst* (Fear of Fear)
- 1976 *Satansbraten* (Satan's Broth).